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ABSTRACT

Behaviorist/structuralist language teachers and theoreticians are beginning to pay attention to contributions from contemporary linguists, psychologists, and educators. This paper draws attention to an obvious, but not often considered, point of interest to all who are engaged in formal language instruction and in related fields. Classroom procedures which run counter to natural acquisition strategies compete for the attention and energies of the language acquirer and may indeed hamper language acquisition. The same holds for language testing procedures. (Author)

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CAN'T LANGUAGE TESTING INTERFERE WITH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION?*

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According to the language learning specialists of the Fries-Lado-Brooks school (Fries, 1945; Lado, 1964; Brooks, 1964), a second language can best be learned by mastering a finite set of isolable structures, one by one, until the entire set of those structures is mastered. Such an approach is intimately linked to an analysis of surface phonetics, syntax and vocabulary into discrete categories and into patterns of those categories. In short, it is linked to the structural linguist's analysis of linguistic data.

This finite set of structures identified by the structural linguist, according to the Fries-Lado-Brooks approach, are learned by virtue of their becoming automatic habits. These habits generalize to, and thus become useful in, situations similar to the one in which they were learned. The mastery of this finite number of phonological, syntactic, and lexical patterns through rote memorization, mimicry, and pattern practice drills is a sort of learning closely associated with behavioral psychology. Modifying be-

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havior, the verbal behavior of the learner, is the goal of language instruction; knowing a language is equivalent to the automatic use of a finite set of language items (syntactic patterns, sound sequences, words and word patterns). It follows, then, that language testing involves the measurement of the degree to which the learner has mastered that finite set of items. This is the so-called 'discrete point' teaching/testing theory.

There are at least two reasons why this approach has not met with a great deal of success: (1) it fails to properly acknowledge that language is infinite in its creative potential, and (2) it fails to capitalize on the redundancy inherent in language. (Spolsky, 1968)

'Knowing a language' means far more than being able to deal with a finite number of surface manifestations, it involves the continual production and comprehension of novel utterances. 'Knowledge of a language' implies the existence in the cognitive make-up of the second language learner of a set of generative rules similar to (if not exactly the same as) those which govern the language use of a native speaker of the language. Such knowledge has been referred to as 'competence' (or'langue') and its description is not incompatible with descritions of knowledge offered by cognitive psychologists (see especially the collection of essays in Bruner, 1973). Although not as conveniently dealt with as surface manifestations, 'competence' comes a great deal closer to dealing with native speaker creativity than have behaviorist-structuralist notions.

Related to the creative nature of the language behavior of native speakers is the fact that natural language is redundant. That is, natural

language uses far more clues to meaning than are theoretically necessary. It is probable that the same rules (rules of 'competence' if you will) are in operation to cause redundancy and to permit creativity. A second language learner who is in the process of acquiring this set of rules, or this 'competence' is probably in the process of sampling language data from the environment, creating approximations (hypotheses) to the native speaker's rules, testing his hypotheses through attempts to communicate, and revising (or substantiating) those hypotheses on the basis of subsequent data. The redundancy in language increases the language learner's probability of formulating ever more accurate hypotheses.

'Knowing a language', then, involves having a command of the grammar (which, incidentally, includes not only linguistic, but also extralinguistic, rules) which describes the speaker-hearer's 'competence'. Learning a language involves the acquisition of that grammar by the learner. It follows that language testing can involve the measurement of the degree to which the learner is able to invoke that grammar to (1) create novel utterances which communicate his intent and (2) cope with environments in which redundancy is reduced or obscured. A test of the former might be Upshur's test of productive communicative ability (Upshur, 1969), of the latter, the cloze procedure (Oller, 1972; Oller and Conrad, 1971; etc.). Both are tests of 'integrative' language skills whose description is effected in terms of generative rules and cognitive categories rather than surface structures and behavioral repertoires.

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From the discussion above it should be clear that the major problem

involved in the discrete point approach to language teaching/testing is that the learner/examinee is made to concentrate his attention on a finite number of surface minifestations, usually to the detriment of communicative use of language. The discrete point testing approach assumes that languages are acquired in terms of mastering finite numbers of syntactic structures, phonemes, and lexemes, and that the acquisition of such can be precisely tested by isolating the language structure to be tested from any surrounding context. It is, in fact, a cardinal principle of those who advocate this approach that one and only one language item be tested at a time (Lado, 1961). It is not unusual to read cautions to the language tester against allowing an examinee to "guess the meaning of the tested word on the basis of peripheral linguistic clues" (Clark, 1972:99).

If it is true, and I believe it to be, that a learner is a 'guesser', then regardless of a teacher's efforts to 'make language a habit' or a set of habitual responses to selected stimuli, the learner will be employing a language acquisition strategy that directs him to sample data and to hypothesize points of grammar (in a non-traditional sense of 'grammar') on the basis of that sample. Then in relationship to the fragmentary grammar that he has built to date, test these hypotheses against current data either productively or receptively, and, finally, revise his hypotheses and his growing grammar in accordance with the results of his testing. The behaviorist/structuralist teacher, then, might well be 'teaching' one thing while the learner is acquiring quite another. In addition to the obvious inefficiency of allowing the two processes to compete for the learner's energy, the

fact is that the data from which the learner is forced to sample are not real language data. Clearly, the grammar that he is constructing, then, is not a grammar of natural language, but rather a grammar of 'language-classese'.

Add to this the fact that the very same teacher is probably providing feedback to the learner which is based upon an anaylsis of surface language into discrete bits, and upon language tests constructed to 'test' mastery of those bits, and you will deduce the greatest problem of all: discrete point testing probably interferes with language acquisition by providing the learner with inappropriate feedback. The learner needs feedback from the 'tests' he himself devises, and needs natural language data upon which to construct a grammar. Discrete point teaching/testing acknowledges neither need.[2] It fails to reflect the use of language in real-life communicative situations, and thereby does not provide the learner with practice in sampling-hypothesizing-testing-revision/incorporation.

Discrete point teaching and testing do have one thing going for them, though. They are infinitely easier to deal with than anything more functional or integrative in design. Lessons which emphasize memorization,

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[2]In the strict sense, it doesn't, but the fact remains that a certain number of language learners do manage to acquire a communicative ability in a second language classroom. I would tend to argue that to the extent that the language data made available to the learner are natural language data and/or to the extent that discrete point drills coincide with the particular point (s) of grammar upon which the learner is currently testing hypotheses, the learner will gain in communicative competence. One must grant that a series of such coincidences can account for the successful acquisition of competence.

repetition, and pattern drilling are a great deal easier to plan and conduct than are lessons designed to present the learner with natural language data upon which to operate. Similarly, tests of discrete language skills are far easier to administer and score (ignoring the complexities involved in initial test item construction) than are dictations, cloze procedures, translations, or compositions (especially oral composition). People tend to take the course of least resistence.[3] But in light of the disappointing results of New Key teaching and testing methodology, the time has long since arrived to modify that easier course in favor of a less secure, mostly uncharted course which would allow the language acquirer to operate on more nearly natural language data.

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[3]It should not be assumed, as the previous comments might seem to imply, that the classroom teacher is viewed as an autonomous entity. It is acknowledged that pressures, usually of an administrative nature, often superimpose themselves upon good intentions. Given, in addition, the lack of widespread development and dissemination of valid and reliable integrative instruments, the classroom teacher sometimes has little choice but to use what he's instructed to use or to use simply that which is available.

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